

# AN ORIENTATION TO FUTURE SEARCH

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Future search is a unique planning method used world-wide by hundreds of communities and organizations. The method enables large diverse groups to (1) validate a common mission, (2) take responsibility for action, and (3) develop commitment to implementation. The method is especially useful in uncertain, fast-changing situations when it is important that everyone have the same large picture in order to act responsibly. Because it is largely culture free, future search is used in North and South America, Asia Africa, Australia, Europe, and India to create umbrellas for social, technological and economic planning.

A future search may involve 60 to 70 people and sometimes 100 or more. People work in small groups as “stakeholders” (shared perspectives), and in mixed groups that are a cross-section of the whole. Every person has a chance to speak and listen. This makes possible a shared picture based on the experience of all those present. The meeting also is managed so that that the entire group can be in dialogue when necessary. The minimum length is four sessions of half a day each, spread across three days to allow for “soak time.” One intensive planning meeting often sets the stage for projects that continue with high involvement for years.

## How Future Search Works

Future search follows tested principles derived from six decades of research and experimentation with what it takes to enable people to act cooperatively without having to defend or sell their own agendas or give up cherished values. The first principle involves “getting the whole system in the room”--meaning people with authority, resources, expertise, information and need. The second involves putting the focal issue in global perspective, helping each person to see a bigger picture than usual. The third requires seeking common ground and desirable futures, while treating problems and conflicts as information, not action items. The fourth asks people to manage their own small groups and take responsibility for acting on what they learn. Future search features working sessions among a wide range of parties who together have what is needed for principled action if they choose to take it.

## The Meeting Agenda

There are five sessions labeled Past, Present, Future, Common Ground, and Action. Each involves creating a data base, sharing understandings in small groups, reports to the whole, and large group dialogues. Sessions are cumulative and the product is an action plan and follow-up structure. People begin with a history of the situation that brought them together. They then build a map of world trends affecting their issue. Each stakeholder group tells what it is doing now about key trends and what its members want to do in the future. Small groups then devise preferred *future scenarios*. People identify their *common ground*, key themes that appear in every scenario. The final session is given over to *action* plans, an implementation strategy and accountability.

## Changing Assumptions

Many future search participants come with justifiable skepticism based on past experiences in unproductive meetings. In future search they often will set aside stereotypes and untested assumptions as they discover what can be accomplished in this new setting. Most future search participants, given access to information, resources, and people in authority who usually are not available all at once, will make effective action plans none of them thought were possible.

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\*Co-directors of Future Search Network, an association based on public service, collegiality and learning with members in 21 countries. They are co-authors of *FUTURE SEARCH: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities* (Berrett-Koehler, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2000). See [www.futuresearch.net](http://www.futuresearch.net) for more information.